

Cosmic Voices

Oliver Jackson: Works on Paper at
the Crocker Art Museum

BY LAURA WEIR HILL and SCOTT HILL



Oliver Jackson, *Intaglio Drypoint I*, 1985, drypoint, ink on paper, 36" x 48",
at the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento.

The prints and drawings that comprise this exhibition reflect Oliver Jackson's affinity for artistic and human experiences. From material to process to subject, Jackson imparts a complex, sophisticated art that is imbued with formal, classical, abstract, African, American, spiritual and metaphorical imagery and influences; often the work centers on abstracted figures that are hidden in, suggested by, or emerge from chaotic compositions and space. Most of these pieces are either drawings or drypoint prints, but Jackson is expressive in both; he achieves many levels of communication, using bold, vigorous lines that often fade into wisps, creating volume and

depth through cross-hatching and spatial placement. And though the drawings range from formal, quiet, elegant figure studies such as *Untitled Nude Study No. 1* and *No. 2* (both 1983) to very quick, energetic sketches, you have the feeling that even with the immediacy afforded by drawing, Jackson knows the full power of each line put to paper, of each pressure point applied, of each contrast of color to paper.

But the real strength to Jackson's work is in the environments he creates on paper. In the end, what sets him apart from others are the stories and scenes, the vivid dreams, the occasional disturbances, and the chaotic structuring of contemporary existence. He is, after all, a storyteller who conveys a diver-

sity of experiences and feelings.

Intaglio Drypoint II (1986) is a swirling, energetic, even frenzied work. Figures—which when recognizable are often African-American males and females, but generalized human renditions just as frequently—huddle in the lower foreground as if they are bracing against the forces of everyday life. Rising above the figures, birds are intertwined with tumultuous black cloudy billows. Like many of Jackson's stories, there is no single fixed point in the composition. Instead, he casts about from lower to upper space, and then across the several assembled, isolated vantage points. And finally at the top of the print, a hazy, ghostly cosmic choir sings out, a spiritual balance between this life and the next.

The work reveals some of the more dominant themes on which Jackson focuses, however. He is interested in harmony and order, and finds in the bridge across the spiritual and natural worlds such a balance. The location of the figures is quite purposeful. They reflect the natural world, that of everyday reality and experience, and they are the point from which Jackson contemplates this reality, in his effort to find and understand the limits of human experience. The figures, like all of us, often find themselves

bound within their lives, incomplete, unable to stretch beyond the frame of the immediate; the world in which humans exist also is filled with experiences, such as birth, aging, and death, that in the abstract are difficult to comprehend, and Jackson also explores the bridges that cross the gaps between the abstract and the real. Those gaps are not a purgatory—they more closely resemble a free-flowing, interactive network, filled with power and harmony. Music and the cosmic choir, as constructed by the artist, are one example of this power. In its full glory, music transcends the worlds in which we live. Music is not just beauty idealized, but realized. The cosmic choir is a harmonizing force that explains the universality of the human condition, and we, like Jackson's figures, need the strength and stability provided by all levels of spiritual and real world experience to find reference points in our lives.

There are other themes and objects in Jackson's work. While the storyline often centers on birth, the reaching of adulthood, procreation, and death, an additional cast of characters includes isolated heads, flowers, birds, gathered figures in a circle, and a paraplegic. But when fully considered, the isolation of themes and scenes is staged. As in *Untitled* (1986), a gestural head, imposed hands and shoes (foot in mouth), and paraplegic, bust and apple floating above,

are not so random. Jackson presents them in one space and makes us think, "Why are they here, what brings these things together?" The process and range of life's experiences is at the fore. Jackson's appeal lies in his ability to make some sense in our lives, to find room for harmony among the botches, mistakes and mishaps that characterize our experience, and to make room for constraints, universal applications, and an empathy and compassion for the range of the human condition.

Perhaps the most intriguing of these constant themes is the paraplegic who pushes himself along on a cart. *Sharpesville Study* (1976) is a small, deft, suggestive ink drawing that isolates this figure. As it stares out of the picture, you cannot help but stare back. Where Jackson's other works reveal harmony and order, the paraplegic reminds us that the natural world apportions very literal injustices, and metaphorically reminds us that though our experiences compel us to a jour-

ney towards higher orders of existence, so too we should remember that there is a dignity to those aspirations as they exist in all humankind. Such aspirations are not limited by poverty, disability, race or gender.

Jackson's work is about big issues; his exhortation to find, reflect upon and celebrate those experiences makes for a worthy and rewarding exhibition. ■

Oliver Jackson: Works on Paper through January 16 at the Crocker Art Museum, 216 O St., Sacramento.

Laura Weir Hill and Scott Hill are

A conversation with Oliver Jackson

BY VICTORIA DALKEY

Since receiving a one-person show at the Seattle Art Museum in 1982, Oliver Jackson has been an important force among Northern California artists. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, he has been a popular and influential teacher at California State University, Sacramento, since 1971. While his work has been compared both to jazz and Abstract Expressionism, Jackson himself denies these connections. His expressionistic abstractions use the figure as focal points for "moments" in the composition, and the relationship to jazz improvisation exists, Jackson notes, only in the ways in which his intense practice in drawing and painting leaves him formally fluent enough to take advantage of the "moment" when it occurs.

Jackson's work has also been noted for its African and African-American influences. But he demurs again: "I am African American so it is natural that that is reflected in my work." Other questions about cultural identity tend to irritate him. "I find them very boring—I never think about such things unless I am reminded of them by others. Since we are in a racially tense time, those questions seem to surface more frequently now, but I am very bored by them."

Artweek *Your drawings look like the work of a person who's been drawing for a long time.*

Oliver Jackson That's true.

AW *It also looks as though drawing comes to you naturally.*

OJ Well, I would like to think so. I've been at it for quite a while.

AW *How do the drawings in the Crocker show relate to your paintings?*

OJ I don't know if it's a one-to-one relationship. I'm not really interested in that. There are drawings that are working drawings. There are drawings that are in themselves made as I would make a painting. They're not paintings, but are made with the same kind of conceptual thrust. And then there are drawings that are just studies, figure drawings, for example, where I'm just trying to take that exercise somewhere because it's interesting. It's making something, but of course it's dominated

by the model in front of you. For me, drawing is just another medium or language with which you can make something, in much the same manner as a painting, at least in terms of the depth of the making process. The thinking can be very similar. But I'm not interested that they should mimic the marks of painting. To me, every medium should just speak clearly in the making process as to how it makes the image. I do think that the particular manner in which you do something can't help but show through from one use to another. But I'm not interested in any superficial consistency between the two.

AW *In terms of subject matter and handling there is a relationship.*

OJ Absolutely. I don't see how you can avoid it. Just like a painting, a drawing in itself is very rich in possibilities. It's not dependent on painting in any way. It can be a support [for painting]. It can give information about the world. It can also be like an *étude* or study for your

own working-out of thematic materials. It can also be very enjoyable just to doodle.

AW *Some of the sheets are like sketchbooks, where you have calla lilies, or wooden shoes or an apple, say, mixed with other elements more typical of your work.*

OJ They kind of grew. Those thematic things come into your vision when you're working, and you're trying to incorporate them and compose at the same time. It's very interesting.

AW *The calla lilies seem to reoccur frequently.*

OJ You sometimes have images that you can work well with, and they seem to be right to use. That flower—I like the structure and the physicality of it. I find it useful as an image. I like its implications as an image, the kind of strong, solitary sense it conveys.

AW *Allan Gordon talks about the content of your work in his essay for the Crocker exhibition. I am more struck by the formality of your work. Do you consider yourself a formalist?*

OJ I don't think about those things.

AW *Do you make any distinction between form and content?*

OJ I don't think about those as separate things. There are images that I can literally take off from that are significant to me, and I couldn't express the fullness of their significance to you. I just feel very comfortable with them. I can get started very well with them, and so I mutate images from them. I can get a composition rolling. So I don't really think of those other concepts at all.

AW *Allan talks about the reclining or fetal figure that seems to float through your work quite consistently.*

OJ Yes, it does.

AW *And he talks about the isolated figure, the head that seems to float almost on its own—he calls it the physiognomic head—and the heavenly or cosmic choir, and the sacra conversazione [sacred conversation].*

OJ That's marvelous. I like it. I really like it. It makes me sound substantial or something.

AW *And he talks about the paraplegic.*

OJ Yes. A lot of these images, like the paraplegic, come from childhood. It's an image that I saw at one time. I was

impressed as a child by the great number of paraplegic people who were on the street selling pencils and things. You don't see it as much today. I was very impressed by it. But I like all these interpretations. They are exciting in themselves. Myself, I try to avoid becoming entangled in my imagery. I just want the relationships to be very potent for the viewer, or provocative. I hope that the relationships are significant visually, in other words, that they provoke the viewer as only an experience can.

AW *So your work is not narrative in any sense.*

OJ Absolutely not. Plenty of imagery but no narrative. And going no place, really. There's no place to go. There's nothing that is said in a narrative, visual sense. There's no story being told. Generally, when people see images, even in sculpture, they think about stories, because images all have names. But I can't help that. I'm using the image for its ability to provoke, simply because images do provoke apart from the meanings we give them. If they somehow touch us kinesi-
thetically into recognition, then they work. I'm interested in putting together imagery that literally holds the viewer and

excites the viewer by the very interrelationship of image and field. That's somehow significant to the relationships going on.

AW *So it's a process of discovery for you?*

OJ It better be. Otherwise it would be absolutely boring.

AW *But there often seems to be a kind of ritual going on, when, for example, your figures are arranged in a circular pattern and appear to be engaged in a profound conversation. It's the circle of the cosmic choir. There seems to be something incantatory going on.*

OJ In the way that I compose, I think, there's a lot of focal places, places where the compositional elements literally culminate, and there usually is imagery at that place at which the field and the so-called figure are deeply integrated and there's a moment in the visual image. That, I think, is what leads people to talk about ritual. Something is presented. It's static, but there's the sense of something dynamic going on. I really like it when people say that, but in fact what I'm trying to do is make these moments.

Victoria Dalkey is a Sacramento-based poet who also writes about art for the *Sacramento Bee*.



Oliver Jackson, *Untitled Nude Study No. 2*, 1983, charcoal on paper, 24" x 18", at the Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento.

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